ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE

An Appreciation of the Author of "Sir Nigel," the Great Romance Which Begins Next Sunday

"When the Most Successful Novelist Writes His Masterpiece the Eyes of the World Who Read Are Upon Him"

"Doyle Has Painted More Wonderful Pictures in Words Than Any of His Forbears With Palette and Brush"

By H. J. W. DAM

WHEN the most successful novelist of our time, at the zenith of his fame, writes his undoubted masterpiece, the literary event calls for more than passing comment. The eyes of all the world who write and of all the world who read become fixed upon the career of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Knight by grace of King Edward, and by grace of the people the first story-teller in the world to-day.

And there is much in his career which is of exceeding interest as to the facts; of exceeding value as to the lessons. Many write and few succeed; but Doyle as a story-teller, as a novelist unequaled in popularity and unequaled in the prices paid for his work, is entirely his own creation. He holds the priceless secret of success, and it is a quest of no little interest to all his readers to discover, if possible, what that secret is.

The first impression, the major cause, the dominant note, that strikes one as he considers him and his work, is physical energy. Whenever and wherever the powerful body is united with the active imagination, success in any line of endeavor is certain, and greatness, as the word goes, is possible. Such are our great statesmen, our great artists, our great lawyers. It is useless for the mind to conceive greatly unless the body can stand the severer strain of executing greatly. With the gift of superabundant energy, however, Sir Arthur has the unusual characteristic of bigness. He is over six feet in height, stalwart, muscular, seeing all things in a big, large-hearted way. He is a member of the Athenæum and the National Sporting Clubs of London, two organizations as far apart in all things as the Poles. And this is one way of saying that he is a man of the highest physical and mental ideals, which indeed is the first and most prominent peculiarity manifest in his novels, his characters and his general literary plan.

And it is most interesting to note how this big lumbering boy in school at Stonyhurst, this boy who wanted to be and easily could have been one of England's famous cricketers, was led into the path of his great success. He knew nothing of his future. He had no definite ambition beyond the desire to be a doctor, and all the while his future was making through causes of which he had no knowledge. "Sow an act and you reap a habit. Sow a habit and you reap a character. Sow a character and you reap a destiny"—is one of the best practical definitions of the dominant force in human lives that has appeared. Underneath all these lies an inherited tendency, a ruling instinct, which lies within ourselves and molds the life of each of us. This eliminates all superhuman influences. And there is no need to seek for superhuman influences in the present instance. Heredity is all-sufficient as the primal cause.

Ireland, through his ancestry, gave him the quick imagination and the versatility of its race. On the walls of his home at Hindhead hang many original pictures which show the strong artistic bent of his family. His grandfather, John Doyle, was a famous caricaturist. His uncle, Richard Doyle, was the famous "Dicky" Doyle of "Punch." The quaint, strange water-colors of his father, Charles Doyle, there to be seen, rival if they do not exceed in originality the work of his uncle. And in their peculiar individuality, in their ghosts and fairies, in their goblin-trees and cloud-framed faces, their fantastic, smiling landscapes and mystic, wraith-haunted graveyards, a breadth of imagination joined to a delicacy and certainty of execution which were the direct heritage of the son. All who are familiar with Sir Arthur's books will know how strong an influence this imaginative gift has exercised upon his work.

Better than this, however, they gave him the draftsman's eye and the draftsman's hand, the power of close observation and the ability to reproduce faithfully what is observed. The most notable feature of Sir Arthur's historical novels is not so much the elaborate and painstaking fidelity in details, as the convincing power of the result. In his greatest novel up to now, "The White Company," we are chiefly impressed, artistically speaking, by the tremendous reality of it all. We breathe the very atmosphere of the dead century. We live the life, we are an actual part of the time, and we cannot escape this feeling. The illusion, in short, is complete, and this proves strong conception, perfect drawing and wonderful completeness of detail. Emerson said that the laws underlying all the arts were the same, and the truth of this was never better exemplified than in the work of Conan Doyle, son and grandson of artists, who has painted more wonderful pictures in words than did any of his forbears with palette and brush.

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Without any dreams of a literary career he went to Edinburgh to become a doctor, and was graduated with distinction at the age of twenty-one. And then he discovered that he wanted to do a great many things which were highly inconsistent with the career of a dignified English practitioner. He wanted to see the world; not the world of cities, but those isolated regions in which strong man met, in daily conflict for his existence, the majestic forces of nature. As the doctor of a whaling-ship he spent two years in the Arctic. Still holding to the sea, he crossed and recrossed the ocean and saw and learned life in West Africa. He was a rolling stone, but he was rolling toward a goal of which he was not aware. Finally repressing his desire to wander, he settled down at Southsea to become a conventional doctor. Fees were slow in coming, but he did not lack humor, and waited his opportunity, until a prominent and wealthy local resident was thrown from his horse in front of the doctor's office. He rushed out, bound up the bruises, called a handsome open carriage and rode slowly through the town, supporting the injured man in an attitude of scientific devotion which would have made the fame of an old master. The admiring populace rose to the picture and said: "How beautiful!" Fees flowed in, the practice was established, and the doctor sighed. Medicine had claimed him, and his life was to be that of a conventional doctor after all.

But now another shaping force made its appearance and grew in volume despite continued discouragement. While in college at Edinburgh he had written a story called "The Mystery of the Sassassa Valley." He was full of untold stories. An ardent reader all through his youth of all that is heroic in fiction, these seeds had germinated in his imagination, and the artist's son wanted to draw, to portray, to create, but in the way of letters. "The Mystery of the Sassassa Valley," his first story, was published by "Chambers's Journal" in 1878, but served no other office at that time than to prove to him that he could write for the public. Four years afterward, however, the spirit again moved him, and he began to steal hours from his practice at Southsea to write other stories. Many were they in number, and wide was their scope. He wrote stories of the sea, stories of the Arctic, stories of war, stories of dead centuries and far countries, and received no encouragement whatever.

Bret Harte once told me that even late in his life he had not been able to realize that his stories were commercial commodities—were actually worth money—that but for his vigilant agent he would have starved to death. Much this view of things was forced upon the Southsea doctor. He wrote between fifty and sixty stories, all of which were accepted and published by "The Cornhill," "Temple Bar" and other magazines, but the pay was in shillings, and they were published anonymously, not being deemed worthy of his unknown signature. In ten years of such ardent and active literary creation he earned less than fifty dollars *per annum* by his pen.

And herein lies one great lesson. That he persisted showed that it was a labor of love and not of profit. Literature was his instinct; he could not help it. No man ever rose or ever will rise to greatness in any branch of human endeavor which he does not love. It is the love of the work which defies discouragement, which causes constant practice and leads to ultimate perfection. Only love can thus finally endow an artist's work with that ease of execution which we call great. To be great is to be able to do without effort that which others find to be impossible.

A potent result of these ten years of unsuccessful writing was thus a steady improvement in style. "The disappointed," said Disraeli, "are always